

Rock marathon *8/5-8/11*

Springsteen breaks records at Meadowlands

By GUY STERLING

Rock 'n' roll New Jersey-style shifts into high gear tonight, with the first of 10 sold-out, record-breaking Bruce Springsteen concerts at the Meadowlands Arena.

The 34-year-old Freehold native brings his E Street Band to the state for shows over the next two weeks in the midst of a year-long tour that began in St. Paul, Minn., in late June and has dates announced in the United States through the fall before moving to Europe.

Sales to Springsteen's Meadowlands Arena concerts set several records at the Bergen County entertainment complex, including the longest stand by a single act, quickest sellout of an extended concert series and highest ticket prices for a rock show.

More than 200,000 of the \$16 seats were sold within a 28-hour period after they were offered for sale through computerized and credit card ticket outlets in mid-June.

At one point in the sales, Ticketron was punching out 280 Springsteen tickets a minute, while the Meadowlands was handling 180,000 calls for tickets an hour on the facility's credit lines.

"To bring in any one act and sell out 10 shows as fast as these did is unbelievable and probably without precedent in the industry," said Loris Smith, the arena's general manager.

"The fact that we could have sold 20 or 25 shows makes it even more amazing."

The demand for tickets and Springsteen's popularity in the state have led his agents and Meadowlands officials to enter into preliminary discussions about ending the tour in New Jersey next year.

The concerts also mark the first return by Springsteen to the arena he opened three years ago and they coincide with the recent release of his seventh album, "Born in the U.S.A."

Both the album and one of its singles, "Dancing

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in the Dark," reached top positions on Billboard's popularity charts and remain in the music magazine's top 10 listings this week.

All of Springsteen's albums have sold more than 500,000 copies, while two, "Darkness on the Edge of Town" and "The River," have sold more than a million records, according to figures compiled by the Recording Industry Association of America.

But Columbia Records, Springsteen's recording company, expects "Born in the U.S.A." to be his best-selling album.

"In the modern era of rock 'n' roll, he stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Mick Jagger (of the Rolling Stones) and Roger Daltrey (of The Who) as the leading front men of the best live bands," said John Scher, a New Jersey concert promoter who has booked Springsteen shows since 1969, including those opening the arena.

"From the point of view of artists emerging in the 70s and 80s, he is without peer."

While he sometimes shows up unannounced at New Jersey nightclubs to play with other bands, Springsteen last toured with his own group in 1981.

On stage, Springsteen's message

lies strictly in his music with no production gimmicks.

The current tour, which played 19 sold-out performances in nine cities before the Meadowlands dates, offers a show lasting 3½ hours, long for many acts but not unusual by Springsteen standards.

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The performances are so physically taxing that Springsteen's 10 concerts at the Meadowlands have been spread out over 15 days, with the band playing no more than two consecutive nights during the stand.

While in the course of a career now stretching into its third decade, Springsteen has come to acquire a national and even worldwide audience and nowhere does his following match that which he enjoys in New Jersey—the territory that offered him the early venues during which he developed his skills and supplied him with rich source material for much of his work.

From his first album, "Greetings from Asbury Park," in 1973, Springsteen's music has given the state an identity people from throughout the country and world recognize without hesitation.

The state has responded in kind, to limits that astonish even industry veterans. At one point, the Legislature even considered designating Springsteen's "Born to Run" the state song.

Three years ago, when Springsteen opened the Meadowlands Arena, complex officials were forced to end a mail-in lottery for tickets to six performances on the second day.

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After counting all the envelopes, they figured they had received enough requests for 19 concerts.

"Springsteen has a following that transcends age," said arena general manager Smith. "Most acts will target a particular age group, but Springsteen is popular with people a generation removed from each other. His demographics are higher than most artists."

Unlike many rock musicians of the day, Springsteen has managed to keep and actually add to his audience despite lengthy breaks between records, an infrequent touring schedule and changes in popular music tastes. Many recall his labors with a succession of Shore bands through the end of the 1960s and his coming of age in the early 70s.

Throughout the last decade, Springsteen's emerging popularity carried over to any number of New Jersey bands to the point that rock music from the state, particularly The Shore, came to be known as the "Asbury Park sound."